

Closing a Private Music Studio: an experiential study

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Abstract

The private music studio plays a crucial role in the education of the musician. One-to-one music tuition is one of the most effective means of learning a musical instrument and students can learn throughout the life-span. The student teacher relationship is vital in not only the technical and musical development of the student, but also in shaping the student's identity and personal growth. This relationship can be described a personal, professional and positive.

In 2010, the author was running a private music studio full-time in Melbourne, Australia. The students ranged from four years old to retirement age and for many students, they had remained with the same teacher since their introduction to music. The instruments taught were flute, cello, double bass and theory which gave diversity to the clientele in regards to choice and musical taste.

The author was offered a Senior Lecturing position in Asia which comprised lecturing, research and private lessons. This was on condition of moving countries. Due to the difference in semester dates, the across had to close the studio at short notice mid-semester to start a new appointment.

The reaction of the students and their families was predictably mixed. The majority of families were first or second generation migrants thus there was a level of understanding for embracing

opportunities overseas. There was much shock, sadness and a feeling of abandonment. Likewise, the author not only had to accept and embrace the forthcoming career and cultural change, but shed a former identity which had shaped the author's persona.

The proposed paper will be an experiential study on closing a private music studio. Musical and social issues will be explored as well as the impact of the teacher on the student and the power of music in ones life.

Preamble

The following paper evolved during the course of the conference. The ideas and concepts discussed were integral to what was finally delivered as a PowerPoint presentation on the final afternoon. It is hoped that these themes do not distract but add another dimension to the information provided below.

Introduction

Closing a Private Music Studio: an experiential study. I could have also subtitled it "You don't know how much you are missed until you leave."

This is so true for music educators. As a profession, we often work well beyond the parameters of a forty hour working week donating our time for rehearsals, additional classes when needed and concerts. In a private studio situation where one-to-one lessons are conducted it is the extra time and care given which separates a very good teacher from an excellent teacher. Ringing parents to discuss issues, going to a luthier to hand pick a cello for a student, writing newsletters, rescheduling classes, preparing programs for students and photocopying sheet music for the student when it is currently out of stock takes time and energy. We are not valued until we leave.

The author moved from Melbourne to Malaysia. Professor Hildegard Froehlich gave a fascinating keynote presentation on the second morning of the conference where she likened music education to the platypus, a native Australian marsupial. As the only Australian at the conference, I used the picture of a platypus in the PowerPoint presentation as a symbol of my home country. It was also appropriate for music education in Australia which is a hybrid of different forms and systems.

The next PowerPoint slide was a YouTube link photo of a dance performance given by the staff as a surprise item in the semester dance Faculty. The dances were the Zapin and the Joget, traditional Malay dances which were performed three Western female staff including the author. The photo gave light on the work environment, local staff and clothing which is often wore during the day (Thursday is National dress day).

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eCQjfNXnGdM> Retrieved 1st June 2011.

In relation to the thread running through the conference on Cultural Imperialism and Colonialism, I am seen as the “other” in Malaysia. Malay music is seen as the “dominant” with Western Music as a style which is foreign to them. This was exemplified when teaching History of Western Music to undergraduate students who did not know of the Western art music canon. Moreover, liturgical works did not have a place in Malaysia which the dominant religion is Islam.

Why Malaysia?

Australia has an excellent education system, however, the tertiary sector is still in the midst of economic rationalism. The universities in Australia are predominantly public and managed and controlled by the Federal government but students have to pay fees which were first introduced

in 1989. There have been cutbacks and amalgamations which has left very limited opportunities for career paths for the next generation of lecturers.

There is a concept in Australia known as the “Tall Poppy Syndrome”. If you are seen as better than the rest of your peers, they are the first to cut you back or put you down. The exception is Australians who have worked overseas. Experience abroad is viewed as superior to local employees. I did not believe this was so embedded in our psyche until I accepted the job in Malaysia. Then, they were interested in considering me for a local academic position.

Australia and Asia are geographically close compared to other Western continents. It is approximately seven hours by plane direct from Melbourne to Kuala Lumpur. When travelling to the United Kingdom or Europe, it is common for Australians to have a stopover in an Asian port in which the more popular cities are Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok. Australia is a country of migrants with now a significant percentage of new citizens from the Asia Pacific Region.

When I applied for academic jobs, the position in Malaysia came up and was a perfect fit with the selection criteria. The tertiary sector in Malaysia is in a stage of growth where there are vacancies for university lecturers.

Changing Careers

Changing careers or jobs is part of modern life. One internet site from Australia stated that “Career change statistics suggest that the average person will be making a career change approximately 5-7 times during their working life.”

During this conference I have not met anyone who works in the same city where they grew up or studied.

In the academic world, one usually shifts institutions and often countries for research projects, personal reasons or promotion. The path from student to professor will invariably include institutional changes, moreover with university restructures and economic rationalism, this is now inevitable. Actively displacing oneself and learning to fit into a new culture cannot be underestimated. Even if it is five minutes down the road, there are always changes. It is often these subtle changes which require the most adjustment.

Identity Theory

Identity theory which has been discussed during this conference fits beautifully with my topic – the decision to close a studio and shift from educator to tertiary lecturer. These statements were discussed during a previous paper at the conference:

- “Who I am at this moment”
- “Who I’d like to become”
- “How I’d like others to see me”
- “Who I don’t want to become”
- “How I make sense of my choices”

I have been studio teaching since age of 16 but have been part of me all my life as I am from a family of musicians. During my PhD studies, I still identified strongly as a studio teacher but after the completing the dissertation in 2005, the label no longer fit to who I wanted to be.

Performer Educator Researcher

In yesterday's "Ethnodrama" by Karin Hendricks and Tawnya Smith, dialogue two described the discomfort and fear of music graduate researchers being asked to perform publicly.

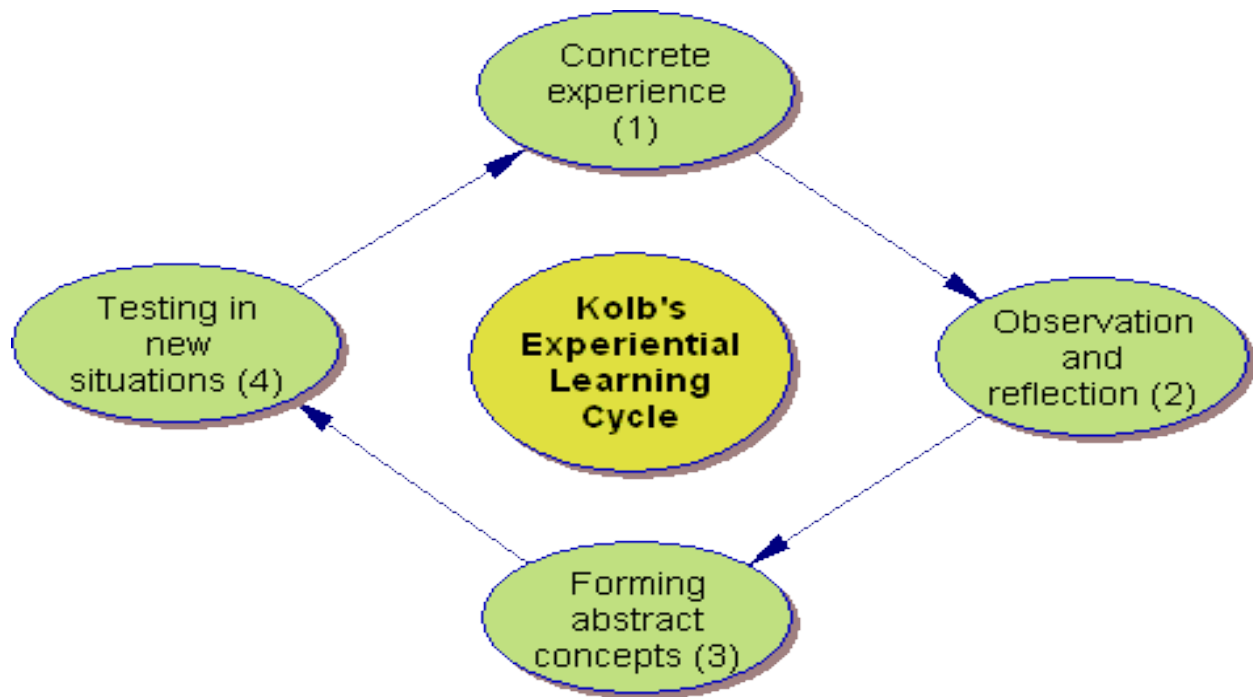
In the music profession, one is labeled a "performer" "teacher" or "researcher". It is often difficult to move between these labels in the profession although most people here would have started their music careers firstly as a performer, had a transition or progression to a teacher (often for economic reasons) and a researcher. My current position encompasses all three. This year I gave two solo recitals on two instruments which meant I had to start building up my performing skills again four months prior to the recitals. My paper is a discussion on the transition from a full-time studio teacher to an academic.

Experiential Learning

I chose this method as the best fit for this research paper. David A. Kolb stated that "learning is a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (1984, p.38).

Cyclical Mode of Learning

Here is a discussion of the cyclical stages of experiential learning.



Learning Theories Knowledgebase (2011, June). Experiential Learning (Kolb) at Learning-Theories.com.

Retrieved June 22nd, 2011 from <http://www.learning-theories.com/experiential-learning-kolb.html>

Four Stages

There are four stages which are in order:

- concrete experience (or “DO”)
- reflective observation (or “OBSERVE”)
- abstract conceptualization (or “THINK”)
- active experimentation (or “PLAN”)

1. Concrete Experience (Do)

In deciding to close the music studio which was an established fulltime job to moving job, country and academia, these four stages of concrete experience or “do” at the beginning where I

closed the studio, packed up and moved country. This was done in two weeks so was quite a whirlwind of activity. This also included finalizing medical tests for immigration, documents, utilities and terminating local memberships. My arrival was on the first day of Ramadan (the Islamic month of fasting) and went straight into lecturing.

Closing the Private Music Studio

Before leaving, informing the students and families was the hardest thing to do. This had to be done personally yet quickly. There was also the responsibility of finding new teachers for the handover. The sequence of events was to first create a list of alternative teachers then call the students. The dialogue for the phone calls was written down, rehearsed then the phone calls were made.

Before ringing each family, I looked at their cultural backgrounds. Over eighty per cent of families were either born overseas or had worked overseas. There were not many families which had remained in Australia their entire lives. The families were either from China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Vietnam, France, Greece, the United Kingdom or Italy. Families who had moved for work purposes usually spent a few years in the United Kingdom or the United States of America before returning to Australia to raise a family. Being on common ground was a great help because they understood about opportunities overseas. Having like backgrounds and experiences gave a sense of empathy and understanding in this difficult situation.

The anticipated response would be surprise, shock, anger, disbelief and betrayal. What was unexpected was the people who were happy for me that I was given an opportunity - but at the same time sad to see me go.

The responses were: "Congratulations. What a great opportunity. We will miss you."

“Wow. What great news for you. We have been happy to have had the time with you. Of course we will continue. Don’t worry about us.”

“This is a surprise. You deserve it.”

“Well, you are a dark horse.”

“I’m shocked. You leaving so soon.”

One parent cried.

One student who had learnt from me from the age of four and was now seventeen was devastated. He said that “if he could not learn cello from me, would not learn from anyone.”

One family hugged and would literally not let go of me.

To help with the transition, I took a photo of the student and me at their last lesson and then sent it to them in a card with a letter. Every student and parent received a card. Exit letters are important. It makes the child feel valued and the parents’ efforts worthwhile. Writing eighty letters was time consuming, but therapeutic. It gave a sense of closure and some time for reflection.

2. Reflective Observation (Observe)

The second stage of reflective observation was done in Malaysia about one month into the job when they took away my passport for the day to take to the Ministry to put in work Visa. The move became REAL, more than an extended camp or workshop. That day was coincidentally a holiday so was in my apartment alone researching and reflecting on new my space and identity.

Also, the time gave me the opportunity to observe the university, the students and their music. Many things were very new to me.

3. Abstract Conceptualization (Think)

This was conducted on two levels, the first was through experiences with the expat community and with new Western international staff. Here, the “why” questions were answered such as the new and subtle yet complicated cultural practices.

The second was conceptualizing the music and education system in the country. Understanding the skill sets the students and their backgrounds was integral to the position.

4. Active Experimentation (Plan)

The planning for the future and others in this experience has literally evolved to arranging to write a guide book for future international staff. This will explain the process of moving countries and what to expect working in the tertiary system in Malaysia.

New Life and Identity

Through this transformative process now have a new life and have shed off the old identity although this will always be part of who I am. As music educators we are in a privileged position to be given new experiences and to embrace change. It is hoped that this presentation highlights how the medium of music is manifested in different ways and is appreciated and enjoyed around the world.

References

Career Change Statistics <http://www.carerers-advice-online.com/career-change-statistics.html>.

Retrieved 30 May, 2011

Learning Theories Knowledgebase (2011, June). Experiential Learning (Kolb) at Learning-Theories.com. Retrieved June 22nd, 2011 from <http://www.learning-theories.com/experiential-learning-kolb.html>